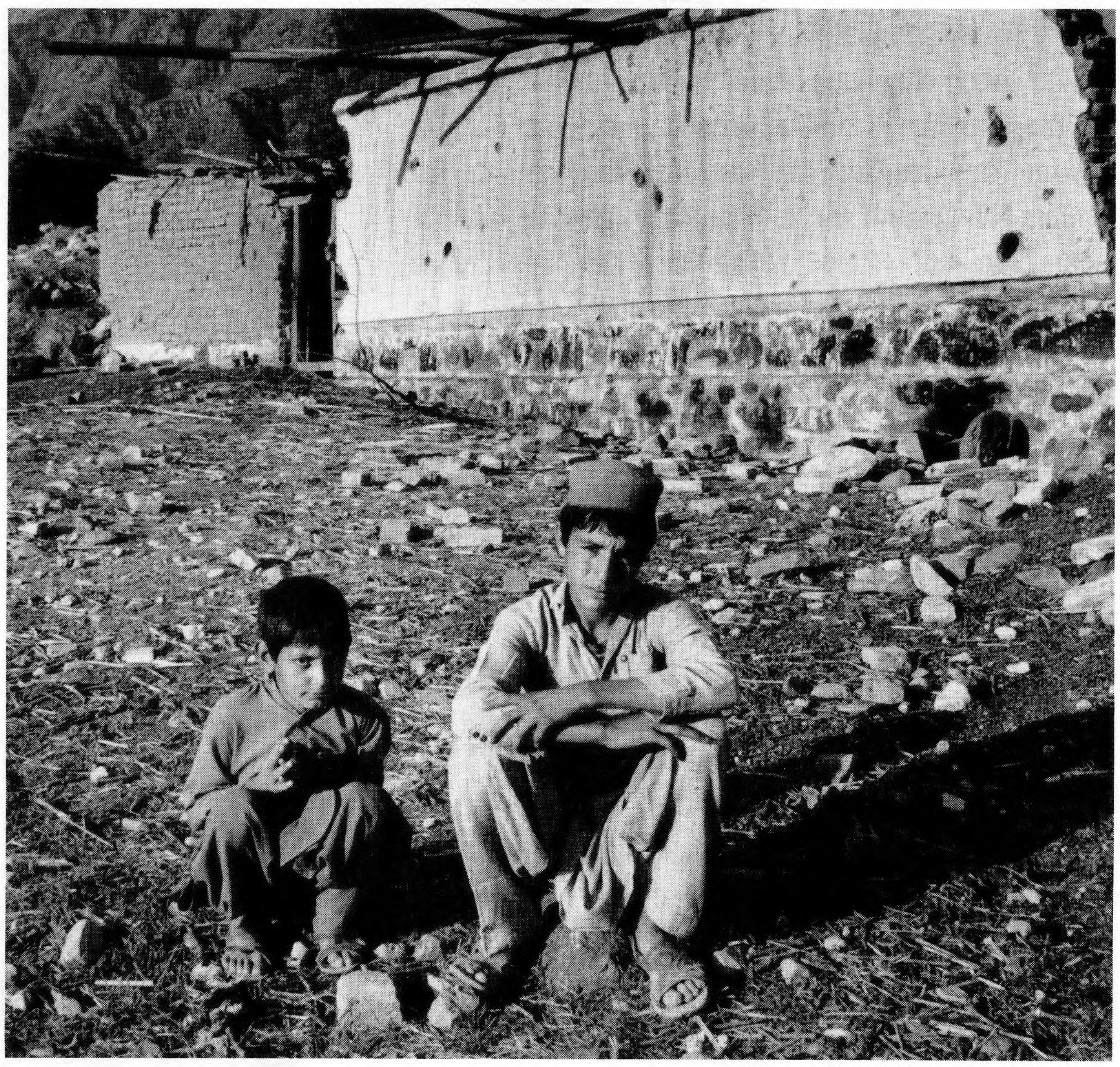
UNHCR's Gerety has reservations about the refugees' decision to go home given the problems there, but believes that they do not have unrealistic expectations. "We're not telling them to go or not go, though some of us have reservations," he said. "We're not trying to substitute our judgment for theirs. They...know best what they can accomplish and what their needs will be. We don't think they are going back thinking that the UN will be helping them." Knowles, however, told USCR that when the Soviets pulled out of Afghanistan and a mass repatriation was expected, there were "all sorts of grandiose plans" for assisting returnees in Afghanistan, and that he wonders whether, since that time, refugees have not retained the impression that when they returned, the UN would in fact be there in a big way. Although Operation Salam has not received nearly enough funding, on paper it does give the impression that the UN plans to offer a lot of help, and refugees may be going back thinking that the UN will indeed follow.

Cause for Concern

Although detailed studies exist of where refugees are from and where they will return, and of general conditions in those provinces and districts, that information apparently was not used to formulate a concrete plan of what specific assistance returnees in any given area would need in the first months after the start of a mass repatriation. USCR is therefore concerned regarding the optimism about the returnees' prospects expressed by many in the relief community. Some of their optimism seemed to be based on impressions and assumptions that may prove over-optimistic.

Nangahar Province: Two Afghan boys sit near what is left of their former school. Photo: USCR/H. Ruiz



These generalizations are based on Afghans' "resourcefulness"; the feeling that they wouldn't return if they didn't have a "plan" for how they would survive the winter and beyond; the proximity of the returnees' home areas to the Pakistani border, which enables them to return to Pakistan to work and earn money to buy food for their families in Afghanistan; the fact that in some areas heads of household have spent time in their home areas, preparing their land for cultivation and rebuilding their homes in advance of repatriating with their families; the porousness of the border, which facilitates food and goods making their way into Afghanistan; the likelihood that some or many returnees still have relatives in the camps receiving rations, or working in Pakistan; and the assumption that after paying for their transportation home, refugees have money left over for other immediate needs.

Afghans no doubt are quite resourceful, but even the most resourceful person cannot rebuild a canal with his bare hands, or plant crops if there are no seeds. Resourcefulness can't make you well if you are ill and there is no doctor and no medicine.

While refugees may indeed have made plans for how they would survive their first months, and their first winter, their plans may, in some cases, be overambitious or unrealistic. For example, Abdurahman, the returnee USCR met in Zawah village, was counting on finding work to earn money for food. But tens of thousands of other men are planning the same thing, and there may not be enough work for nearly as many as are counting on it.

Going to Pakistan to work may be an option, but it too may be a limited one, particularly if Pakistan wants to discourage former refugees from returning there. Also, unless there are several men in the family, it is difficult to return to Pakistan and work and at the same

time begin to rebuild in Afghanistan.

While many families that have repatriated did send an "advance team" to make preparations, many others couldn't because their homes and land were in government-controlled areas. USCR interviewed several returnees in that situation who were only just beginning to rebuild their homes and prepare their land. They most likely will not be ready to plant until the spring, and won't have their first harvest for several months after that.

The Afghan/Pakistani border is porous, but Pakistan may not allow the free flow of goods, particularly commercial food supplies, across the border. There have been food shortages in Pakistan recently, exacerbated by severe floods that left many homeless and dependent on food aid from the Pakistani government. Already, people crossing the border from Pakistan into Afghanistan are prevented from carrying certain foodstuffs with them (wheat distributed to refugees as part of their encashment package is exempted).

The assumption that refugees will probably have cash left over from their cash grant after paying for their transportation home, and that they can use that cash to buy basic necessities, may also be unrealistic. Several of the refugees USCR spoke with said that their cash grant was either barely enough, or not even enough, to get them home. One refugee who is still living in Pakistan told USCR that to rent a truck for him and his family to return to his home in Azra district, Logar province, would cost 10,000 rupees (about U.S. $395), because Azra is in the mountains, and is difficult to reach. The cash grant given by UNHCR when refugees encash is only 3,300 rupees (about U.S. $130). Another refugee said that hiring a truck to Kabul costs 4,000 to 5,000 rupees, not because it is difficult to reach, but because of the danger involved. [UNHCR, in collaboration with the International Organization for Migration, provides extra transportation assistance to refugees returning to northern Afghanistan, but not to eastern Afghanistan.]

Returnees Busy Rebuilding

USCR interviewed a number of returnees in and around Jalalabad, a major provincial capital in eastern Afghanistan, and in several villages in western Nangahar province, at the foot of White Mountain, to see how they are faring.

The extent of the destruction USCR staff encountered in the Afghan countryside was extraordinary. Every village USCR visited had been either partially or totally destroyed, either as a direct result of the war, or through neglect (most of the villages had been largely or totally abandoned for years). Water sources for drinking water and irrigation were in poor repair or also completely destroyed. Some of the villages, particularly those near Jalalabad had been under government control or in a war zone until April, so no refugee "advance teams" had been there to start rebuilding prior to the start of the mass repatriation. A number of UN and NGO projects are helping to restore canals in some areas, but the need is greater than the existing projects' capacities. In one of the villages USCR visited, the International Rescue Committee was helping restore the drinking water supply, but there was as yet no program to help the refugee rebuild the irrigation canals.

Every village USCR visited had been either partially or totally destroyed, either as a direct result of the war, or through neglect.

In other areas visited, refugees had been able to return and start preparing their land. Crops were already growing in places. The returnees USCR met were generally in good spirits, and glad to be back home, but concerned about the winter. All are busy repairing their homes, preparing their fields for cultivation, and working together to rebuild canals and water sources--all full-time jobs for months to come. Demining operations continue, but millions of mines still remain in fields, villages, and along roads.

In Murgha village, in central Nangahar province, Said Amin and his family have been back for six months. Because he has been busy rebuilding his house, which should be finished before winter starts, he has not been able to seek extra work. He and his family have been living on the rations they were given when they encashed before leaving Pakistan, and on the money they had saved. When USCR met Said Amin in late September, he and his family had enough food for 20 to 25 days. After that, he planned to find work two days a week, so that he could buy food but still have time to work on his land and house. "All the men in the village are doing the same," he said. Said Amin said that he will plant at the beginning of next season (spring), and after three months he will have his first harvest. But even before going to Pakistan his land was not enough to feed his family, and

MINES: A DEADLY LEGACY

About 10 million mines are thought to have been laid in Afghanistan. They have been dropped randomly from the air, laid in concentrated clusters and minefields, laid singly and as booby-traps. Often they are washed down by floods on to previously cleared land. In some areas, they are everywhere: in villages; gardens; tracks; fields. In others, they may be only on access roads. There are large quantities of unexploded ordinance in almost all the areas where intensive fighting has taken place. Information on the locations, concentrations, and types of mines is acquired slowly and often tragically. The problem tends to be worst in provinces bordering Pakistan, and in areas where fighting was heaviest.

Surveys carried out in Kunar, Logar, and Paktika provinces suggest that 20 percent of disabled people are victims of mines or unexploded ordnance. If this is true for the country as a whole, about 400,000 people will have been disabled in this way. Nobody can be sure how many people have been killed by mines, but a figure of 200,000 may be realistic.

The demand for help with mine clearance increased dramatically as refugees began to return to Afghanistan in large numbers after the events in Kabul of April 1992. Sadly, figures provided by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) show conclusively that the number of civilians being injured by mines, and coming to their hospitals for treatment, has risen substantially since the repatriation began. Many of the victims are people travelling home or who had just arrived there.

The [mine clearing] program executed by UNOCA with the cooperation of six NGOs has been unable to expand to meet the needs, due to serious funding constraints. The Mine Awareness Program, a critical element in the efforts to reduce the number of civilian casualties, had to be stopped altogether for a period owing to lack of funds.

--Adapted from UNHCR reports.

"My nightmare is that if many of the million-plus refugees who have repatriated find that they cannot survive the winter, they will decide to return to Pakistan. Then God help us all."

now, with the shortage of water for irrigation, he will produce even less of his needs.

In neighboring Serawondei village, another returnee said that he is happy to be home, but told USCR, "We have many problems. We need to buy food and material for shelter; we need money for transportation; we need animals. There isn't one single problem, there are many." He said that some of the families that have returned to his village may have to return to Pakistan.

In the same village, USCR met Mahammad, whose family is one of eight related families that returned together and are staying in a tent in the courtyard of their former home. Mahammad said that their situation was particularly difficult, because they do not own any land. Before the war, they worked on some of the larger farms in the area, but now there is no demand for their labor. To survive, he and members of his extended family collect firewood and take it by donkey to larger towns where they sell it. The men have tried to find regular work, but have been unsuccessful.

Many of those involved in the relief effort (particularly donors) are concerned that the limited number of income generating avenues open to refugees will exacerbate an already major problem: opium production. Afghanistan is reportedly one of the world's top two opium producing countries. According to the November 30, 1992 *U.S. News & World Report*, "Experts are certain that as returnees look for quick money-makers, a poppy boom is inevitable. So is increasing heroin addiction in Afghanistan and Pakistan."

Surviving the Winter

Even though generally optimistic about the returnees' prospects, those familiar with the situation recognize the potential for problems during the winter. ACBAR's Dupree said, "My nightmare is that if many of the million-plus refugees who have repatriated find that they cannot survive the winter, they will decide to return to Pakistan. Then God help us all." She added that while Pakistan and the Pakistani people have

shown remarkably good will towards the refugees during the last 13 years, "The situation has changed; the good will is gone, and much of the infrastructure that was in place to help the refugees is gone. So it's incumbent on the UN and NGOs to ensure that the returnees can survive in Afghanistan."

DACAAR's Christensen echoed Dupree's concern. He said that some returnees may be thinking that if the situation gets too difficult, they can return to the camps in Pakistan. "That may be a miscalculation," he said. "Pakistan may no longer want them." Christensen worries about the winter in Afghanistan, in part because he said he has been unable to get a sense from the UN of how much food is or is not available in Afghanistan. He said, "If the situation gets very bad, those with guns will take charge and create anarchy." According to Knowles, "that is what is happening already."

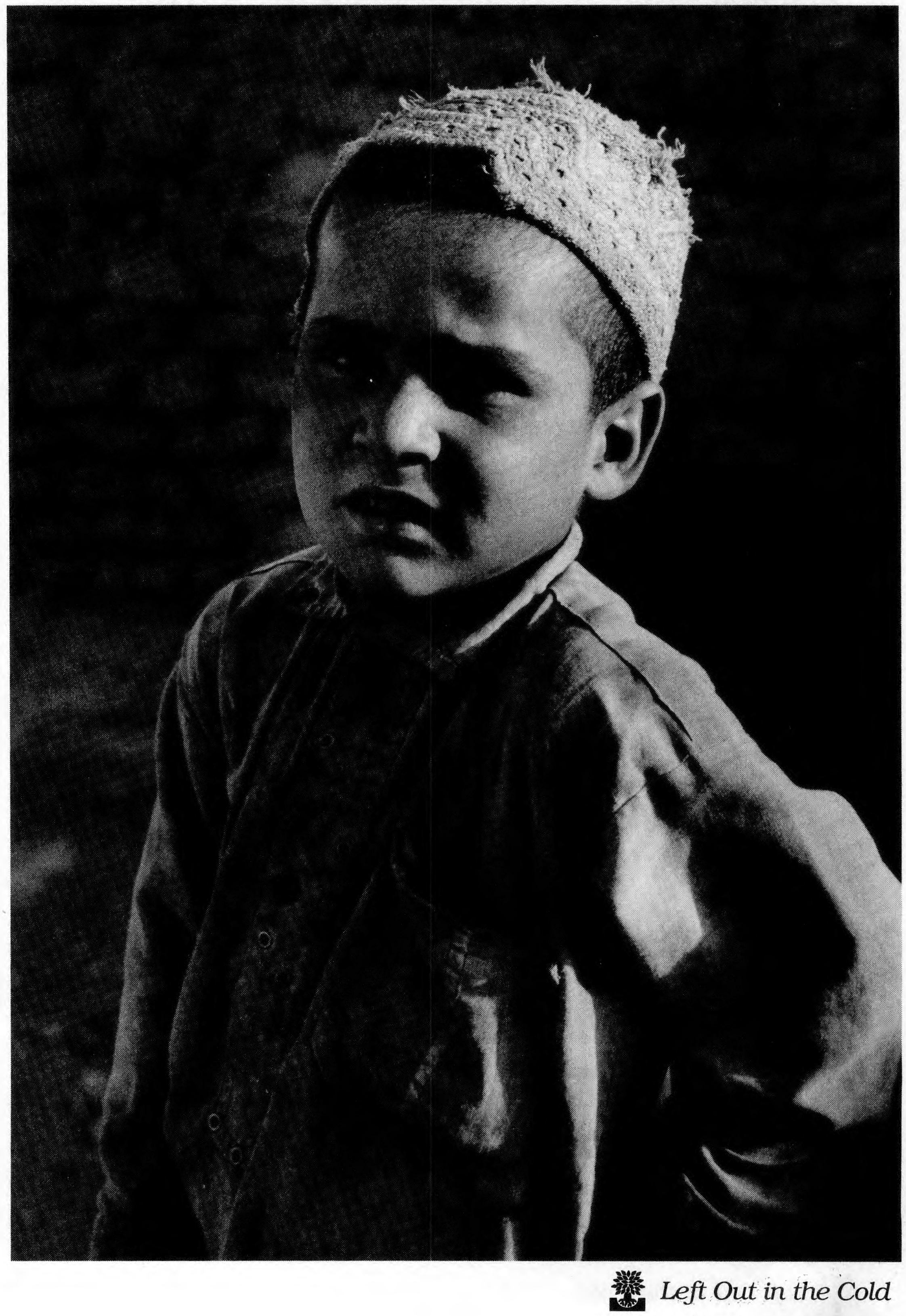
The UN's request for winter emergency funds identified four "life-saving" sectors for which urgent international support is needed: food aid, shelter, winter fuel, and health. The UN is seeking $17.6 million "to ensure survival through the winter for many Afghans."

Afghan Refugees in Iran Received Less Repatriation Aid

According to the Iranian Ministry of Interior's Bureau for Aliens and Foreign Immigrants Affairs (BAFIA), the government agency responsible for refugees, there are 2,942,000 Afghan refugees in Iran, 93 percent of whom live alongside Iranians in cities, towns, and villages throughout the country, including more than 600,000 in and around Tehran, Iran's capital. (UNHCR puts the refugee figure at 2.8 million. Other sources say the actual figure is much lower, noting that at least 700,000 to 800,000 of the Afghans included in the 2.94 million figure were working in Iran before 1979, and that Iranian estimates of the number of refugees in both urban and rural areas appear high). They say that some 200,000 Afghans have repatriated this year. The international community has offered considerably less aid to Afghan refugees repatriating from Iran than to Afghans repatriating from Pakistan. The Iranians have been upset about the disparity, and worried that it may lead to many of the refugees remaining in Iran, causing the country continuing problems. UNHCR's Bhaket has also been concerned about the disparity. "It's not fair to spend $1.7 million in one country and not one dime in another country for the same population," he said. [In July, UNHCR was currently spending approximately $2 million per week on the repatriation program in Pakistan.]

USCR spent several days in Khorasan province in eastern Iran, interviewing refugees and local officials in cities, villages, refugee camps, and at the Iran/Afghanistan border. USCR asked the refugees what they knew about conditions in their home areas in Afghanistan,

Afghan refugee boy in Iran. The Iranian government complained that Afghans in Iran receive less international assistance to repatriate than do Afghans in Pakistan. Only about 200,000 Afghans have repatriated from Iran, compared to more than 1.2 million from Pakistan. Photo: USCR/H. Ruiz



and what thoughts and plans they had regarding repatriation.

At Shamsabad camp, home to some 42,000 Afghans, USCR interviewed several refugees who had recently visited their home areas in Farah and Herat provinces in Afghanistan. Mohamed, a 27-year-old refugee who had been to his home in Farah city just ten days before, said, "The situation is calm, but not stable. Whoever has more power is the big man of the day." He is not planning to repatriate until things are more settled. "My main concern is security. I don't want to fear arrest, or that my relatives will be killed."

In late August, Pakistan closed its border to any new Afghan refugees, an action that drew protests from UNHCR.

Another refugee in Shamsabad had traveled to Herat city two months earlier. He said, "There was a lack of food, and no work. That prevents me, and others, from returning. In Iran, we have work and food, and other facilities." He added that some of those who repatriated went back "without making a proper assessment. And now they are stuck there." Sultan, a refugee living in the village of Daftabad, said that 200 of the 300 Afghan families living in his village do not want to return to Afghanistan at all.

USCR also interviewed Afghan refugees in the Golshahr neighborhood of Mashad, the capital of Korasan province. Some 250,000 Afghans are said to live in Golshahr. Most of those interviewed said they would return home eventually. One refugee from Balkh province in Afghanistan said lack of transportation and poor security on the roads hold him back. A refugee from Bamyan province said that he would need "agricultural tools and financial support for some time, so that I can survive until I get the product of my own land." The one refugee interviewed without BAFIA present said that neither he nor any of the 80 to 90 people in his extended family wanted to repatriate.

[A new repatriation program for Afghan refugees in Iran was scheduled to begin on December 1, 1992. Under the new program, Afghan refugees repatriating from Iran will receive a cash grant of U.S. $25, fifty kilograms of wheat, and plastic sheeting for temporary shelter.]

Kabul Displaced Among Most Vulnerable

Besides the nearly six million Afghans who fled to neighboring countries during the years of the war, hundreds of thousands of other Afghans became internally displaced. Many moved to rural areas where there was less fighting, but a significant number moved to Kabul, which was firmly under Soviet and later Najibullah control, and which remained peaceful throughout the war. The calm in Kabul ended brutally when rival *mujahedin* groups battled for control of the city after Najibullah's fall. They shelled the city indiscriminately, killing thousands of civilians.

The battle for Kabul, which continued on and off throughout the summer of 1992 and has yet to be fully resolved, caused half a million of the city's inhabitants to flee. For weeks, most were camped or sleeping in the open on the outskirts of Kabul, hoping the fighting would end. When it became clear that it wouldn't anytime soon, they began heading north and east in search of food and shelter. In late November, many remained living in camps, where they are receiving some assistance from the UN and private agencies. USCR visited the camps in Jalalabad and interviewed a number of displaced people. Although some had tents, most had only tarpaulins, which can shield them from the sun but provide little protection from the cold and wind. Most indicated that even if peace were restored in Kabul soon, they would have to stay in the camps through the winter because their homes had been destroyed. They, like many other of the displaced, remain almost totally dependent on international aid.

UN officials and NGOs stress that though the situation in Kabul remains volatile, and the likelihood of a cohesive Afghan government in the immediate future remains faint, in most areas of Afghanistan, particularly in the areas where most of the displaced are located and to which most refugees have been returning, the work for which they do have funding continues largely uninterrupted (although that too could be affected if the *mujahedin* fail to reach a political accord and if the fighting that has so far been mostly limited to Kabul spreads around the country). The UN is urging donors not to allow the situation in Kabul to deter them from committing resources to urgent needs in the rest of Afghanistan.

Kabul Refugees Also Reached Pakistan

Some 62,000 Afghans who fled the fighting in Kabul made their way to Pakistan this summer,



Returnees in Nangahar Province, October 1992. Photo: USCR/H. Ruiz

ironically crossing into that country seeking refuge at the same time that thousands of former Afghan refugees were leaving Pakistan heading to Afghanistan. In late August, Pakistan closed its border to any new Afghan refugees, an action that drew protests from UNHCR. Most of the Kabul refugees who did get into Pakistan--a largely urban population--are staying with friends and relatives in Peshawar. However, some 12,000 are now living in the ruins of abandoned refugee camps that repatriating refugees left behind. USCR visited these camps also, and found the refugees living in very difficult conditions, supplementing the limited aid they have received by working on road construction crews for less than $1.00 per day. The new refugees have not been welcomed by the older refugees, who tend to associate them with the communist regime. Like the displaced in Jalalabad, the Kabul refugees in Pakistan say they will stay at least through the winter, but will remain longer if Kabul is not completely peaceful.

Repatriation 1993

How refugees who have already repatriated to Afghanistan fare during the winter could have a strong impact on the course of repatriation in the coming year (the 1.58 million Afghan refugees still remaining in Pakistan and approximately 2.7 million Afghans in Iran continue to constitute the world's largest refugee population--by far). The level of repatriation is likely to remain low throughout the winter, but barring a major outbreak of fighting, UNHCR and virtually all others involved in the refugee program anticipate another large surge in repatriation next spring. In early December 1992, however, UNHCR's Chief of Mission in Pakistan, Nicholas Morris, told USCR that refugees in Pakistan were becoming more pessimistic about the ability of the *mujadehin* leaders to reach a political accord that would prevent further conflict.

Although most Afghan refugees clearly want to go home, there are probably many refugees who are concerned about repatriating.

Those whose homes were destroyed, who don't have land or whose land is mined or in very poor condition, and those who know that there is no drinking water or water for irrigation in their home area will hesitate to return unless they think that they will get some help. Khan, the Pakistani government refugee official, said, "If the refugees [still in Pakistan] see that those who have returned already do not do well, they will feel discouraged from repatriating." He added that the rate of repatriation will also depend on "the cessation of hostilities, the level of UN reconstruction activity in Afghanistan, and to what extent refugees see possibilities for their economic absorption."

UNHCR's Batson concurs. She said, "For the foreseeable future, economic, political, ethnic and religious considerations will continue to affect each refugee family's decision as to whether or not and when they should return home.... If fighting does not spill over Kabul province lines, return to Paktia [province] could commence as early as next spring. Refugees from western Paktia currently make up the largest single population group still in Pakistan...." Besides active conflict, Batson added, "The single biggest inhibitor to return is the degree of destruction in any given area. Although Afghans have shown...considerable willingness to tackle their problems irrespective of international assistance, the amount of reconstruction aid will affect the speed with which refugees are able to return home."

Refugees with whom USCR spoke in Pakistan reflected similar thinking. Some said that they were concerned about the fighting in Kabul, because that might spread to other areas of the country. One refugee offered the following analogy: "If the heart is affected, the whole body is affected. Kabul is the heart of Afghanistan." A refugee in Badabera camp, near Peshawar, who is an influential elder and *mujahedin* commander, added, "We are waiting for a foreign organization to be present in our district to help us rebuild our houses, and a tractor to be able to farm, because our land is in very bad condition." Asked what he and the other refugees in his group would do if no NGO is able to help his home village, he replied, "Eventually we have to go back, because Pakistan won't keep us forever. So, even if we have no shelter, we will have to go."

A refugee in a nearby camp said that he and his family will find it very difficult to repatriate not only because their homes are destroyed and their land damaged, but also because they have no money to get home. "Earlier this year we weren't getting any food rations, and didn't have enough money to buy food, so we turned in our ration cards to get cash and food. We encashed not because we were going back, but because we needed to eat." Now, even if they wanted to return, the family would not have the means to do so.

* * *

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

When the people of Berlin tore down the infamous wall that divided them, their city, their country, and, ultimately, East from West, the Cold War ended abruptly. Refugee advocates saw the possibility for the resolution of Cold War-fueled conflicts that led most of the world's refugees to flee their homes, and the potential for large scale repatriation.

In Afghanistan, one of the Cold War's major battlefields, its demise did not directly help to resolve the conflict. But it did lead to Moscow and Washington cutting off military aid to their respective proxies, the Soviet-installed Najibullah regime and the *mujahedin*. Left alone, the Najibullah regime soon fell. Fighting continues, though, as rival *mujahedin* factions have battled for Kabul, displacing a further half million Afghans. Nor has it brought political stability or democracy to Afghanistan. But it has opened the way for the large-scale repatriation of Afghan refugees.

Voluntary repatriation is the optimum "durable solution" for refugees that UNHCR and donors seek, and is certainly cheaper than maintaining large populations in refugee camps for years on end. Therefore, one might have expected the international community to help make the Afghan repatriation a successful process--one that will put Afghans on the road to recovery, not just get them home and leave them out in the cold.

Yet, by and large, the latter is exactly what is happening. Four times this year, the United Nations has gone to the international community asking for funds to provide emergency relief as well as rehabilitation and reconstruction assistance to Afghans and Afghanistan. The first three times, the international response was, as the UN itself put it, "lukewarm", and "modest". The verdict on the fourth--and most urgent--request is still out. Thousands of lives hang in the balance.

It is not the case that relief and rehabilitation assistance do not exist in Afghanistan. By some standards, the level of activity taking place, as well as the amount of money made available to make that activity possible, could be considered substantial. But the dimension of the problem in Afghanistan is so large that the present level of aid falls well short of the need.

In 1992, a staggering 1.4 million Afghan refugees returned home. If they had returned to a relatively prosperous country with its economy, infrastructure, and social services intact, they would no doubt still have needed assistance. But not only is Afghanistan one of the world's least developed countries, it has also been totally devastated by 13 years of war. With the probable exception of Mozambique, few countries could be less equipped to absorb 1.4 million returned refugees, let alone the millions more that may follow.

To ensure the short-term survival of Afghans at risk, and to help Afghans and Afghanistan on the road to recovery from a 13-year war in which many in the international community had a hand, the U.S. Committee for Refugees makes the following recommendations:

1. Afghans must find a political solution to their differences and bring an end to the fighting that has broken out between rival groups since they defeated their common enemy. The international community should assist that process.

If the various Afghan factions do not work out a solution to their differences, inter-ethnic fighting could engulf the whole country, bringing the Afghan repatriation to a screeching halt, and threatening the continued survival of Afghanistan's civilian population. It is difficult to predict just how far the situation could deteriorate, but a Yugoslavia-like scenario is at least a possibility.

The international community played a key role in helping bring about the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan, and the eventual cut-off of Soviet and U.S. military aid to the warring factions there. But it has not been nearly as active in trying to help mediate between the various *mujahedin* groups. There is both a need and scope for such mediation. Afghans may reject an offer of outside mediation, but it must be pursued. The stakes are very high.

If the various Afghan factions do not work out a solution to their differences, inter-ethnic fighting could engulf the whole country, bringing the Afghan repatriation to a screeching halt.

2. The international community must fully, and urgently, fund the UN's "Winter Emergency" appeal for Afghanistan.

The $17.6 million sought by the Secretary General for what the UN appeal document states are "'life-saving sectors' requiring urgent action to ensure survival through the winter for many Afghans" is not a great sum as governments' expenditures go. As of December 8, donors had only pledged $3.3 million of this amount. They can and should pledge the full $17.6 million.

3. The United States should take the lead in mobilizing a satisfactory international response to the UN's broader, and equally important, appeal for relief, rehabilitation, and reconstruction aid to Afghanistan and the Afghan people, including the nearly one and a half million returned refugees and the internally displaced. Other major donors should do their share.

The United States, which for more than a decade provided substantial military and other assistance to the *mujahedin*, should take the lead in responding to the UN's regular appeal for Operation Salam. Washington was able to find more than $2 billion to aid the *mujahedin* during the 1980s. It has only found some $14 million in cash and food aid for the UN's emergency relief, repatriation, and rehabilitation program this year (most of which went to UNHCR for the encashment program). The United States can find the means to do more.

The United States cannot and should not be expected to go it alone, however. Other donors, including some who also had a hand in the war, have been slow and ungenerous in their response. Japan, the United Kingdom, Sweden, and the Netherlands have come forward to help, but other major donors such as Germany, France, and Canada have been particularly lukewarm. Australia and the European Community could also do more. Russia, though probably not in a position economically to respond in any substantive way, should make at least a symbolic contribution, and should be active in encouraging others to respond.

Helping Afghans recover from the war is not only morally right, but politically expedient. Afghanistan is situated at the crossroads of the Middle East, Central Asia, and the Indian subcontinent, a region of strategic and political interest to many in the international community. If Afghans are not assisted to recover, not only might the Afghan people face further humanitarian crises, but social conditions that contribute to political instability will continue to prevail. Instability in Afghanistan can have a destabilizing influence in a region of the world in which the international community would certainly not like to see even more problems.

4. UN and relief agencies must make a better effort to coordinate relief activity within Afghanistan.

Besides aid channeled through UNOCA and Operation Salam, assistance is going to Afghanistan from various other sources: Western NGOs, donor countries' bilateral aid programs, governments in the region, and private or religious groups from various Muslim countries. There is little coordination of relief from these various sources (and insufficient coordination of even resources channeled through Operation Salam). This results in confusion, duplication of services, and worse yet, gaps in coverage in some areas where services are urgently needed. All the above players, including regional governments and Muslim groups that have in the past remained almost completely apart from others in the relief community, should commit themselves to greater coordination. That can only benefit all Afghans.

5. Countries in the region must stop fermenting trouble in Afghanistan for their own gains.

Washington and Moscow have, we are told, ended their political/military involvement in Afghanistan, but other governments (and political/religious groups) in the region--Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan among them--continue to advance their own political ends by supporting rival Afghan groups. They are doing a disservice to Afghanistan and contributing to instability in the region. They should be persuaded, and at least some should be open to persuasion, to end such activity.

6. The government of Pakistan should officially re-open its border to any new refugees fleeing Afghanistan, and remain flexible regarding the temporary return to Pakistan of former Afghan refugees who have repatriated.

The Pakistan government has for more than a decade hosted the world's largest refugee population. Its generosity has been commendable. However, in August 1992, after more than 62,000 new Afghan refugees fleeing the violence in Kabul entered Pakistan, Islamabad officially closed the border. That action runs counter to the generous spirit Pakistan has long displayed. Hopefully, there will not be new waves of refugees fleeing Afghanistan. But the political situation in that country remains unstable, and new refugee flows are at least a possibility. It is imperative that they be able to seek safety in Pakistan if that becomes necessary.

* * * *

The next few months will be critical in Afghanistan. But so will the next few years. Two key factors will determine Afghanistan's future: Afghan rebel leaders' ability to iron out their differences and bring the deadly Afghan conflict to a final conclusion; and the level of the international community's commitment to successful repatriation, rehabilitation, and reconstruction in Afghanistan, as measured by its response to the critical needs there. The international community, and particularly the United States and Russia, has a moral responsibility to respond. It is also in its political interest. Instability in the heart of central Asia, whether economic, social, or political, can only lead to increased instability worldwide.

LEFT OUT IN THE COLD
THE PERILOUS HOMECOMING OF AFGHAN REFUGEES

After more than a decade in exile, Abdurahman, a sixty-year-old Afghan refugee, returned from Pakistan to his home in Zawah village, at the foot of Spin Ghar, or "White Mountain." It is an area of immense natural beauty: snow-covered peaks, green valleys, clear skies. It is also the scene of appalling destruction. Almost every house in Zawah and neighboring villages, including Abdurahman's, has been destroyed or badly damaged. The school and clinic are gone. Once fertile fields are overgrown, and the canal system that once fed them is in ruins. The one bright spot in Zawah is the drinking water system that an American relief group recently helped the villagers install.

Next spring, if the irrigation canals have been repaired, Abdurahman will plant crops in his own land, and, for the first time in years, will be able to feed his own family. In the meantime, however, winter is approaching, and his family only has enough food to last a few weeks. Abdurahman is planning to look for laboring work to earn money to buy food, but so are most of the other men in his and many other villages. Abdurahman hopes he will be one of the lucky ones. If he's not, this winter could prove very bitter for him and his family.

Introduction

During the first week of November 1992, the United Nations issued an urgent request for emergency funds to assist the people of Afghanistan, including more than 1.4 million Afghan refugees who, like Abdurahman, have returned to their homes this year, and hundreds of thousands of internally displaced persons. The UN's request for funds for this "winter emergency" is the world body's fourth for aid to Afghans this year (two "Appeals" and two "Notes"--urgent requests for immediate funds towards existing appeals). It became necessary in part because of the unprecedented scale of Afghan repatriation that has taken place since the fall in April of the Soviet-installed Najibullah regime, the large-scale displacement caused by the battle for Kabul, the Afghan capital, that followed Najibullah's fall, and the onset of the harsh Afghan winter. This latest request has also become necessary, however, because of what the UN has described as donors' "lukewarm" response to its earlier appeals for Afghanistan, which many UN and private agency relief officials say reflects donors' loss of interest in Afghanistan following the end of the Cold War.

It is too early to know what donors' response to the winter emergency request will be, but winter is nearly here, and donors, in part because of bureaucratic constraints, often do not respond quickly. It is vital that they do. According to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), "Eighty percent of Afghans returning from Pakistan to northern Afghanistan say they don't have enough food for the winter, when roads will be blocked and temperatures will plunge below zero. All five large food [storage] silos in the country are empty." The fighting that took place between rival rebel groups for control of Kabul displaced more than 500,000 of the city's residents, tens of thousands

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The U.S. Committee for Refugees is a public information program of the American Council for Nationalities Service. Established in 1958, USCR encourages the American public to participate actively in efforts to assist the world's refugees.

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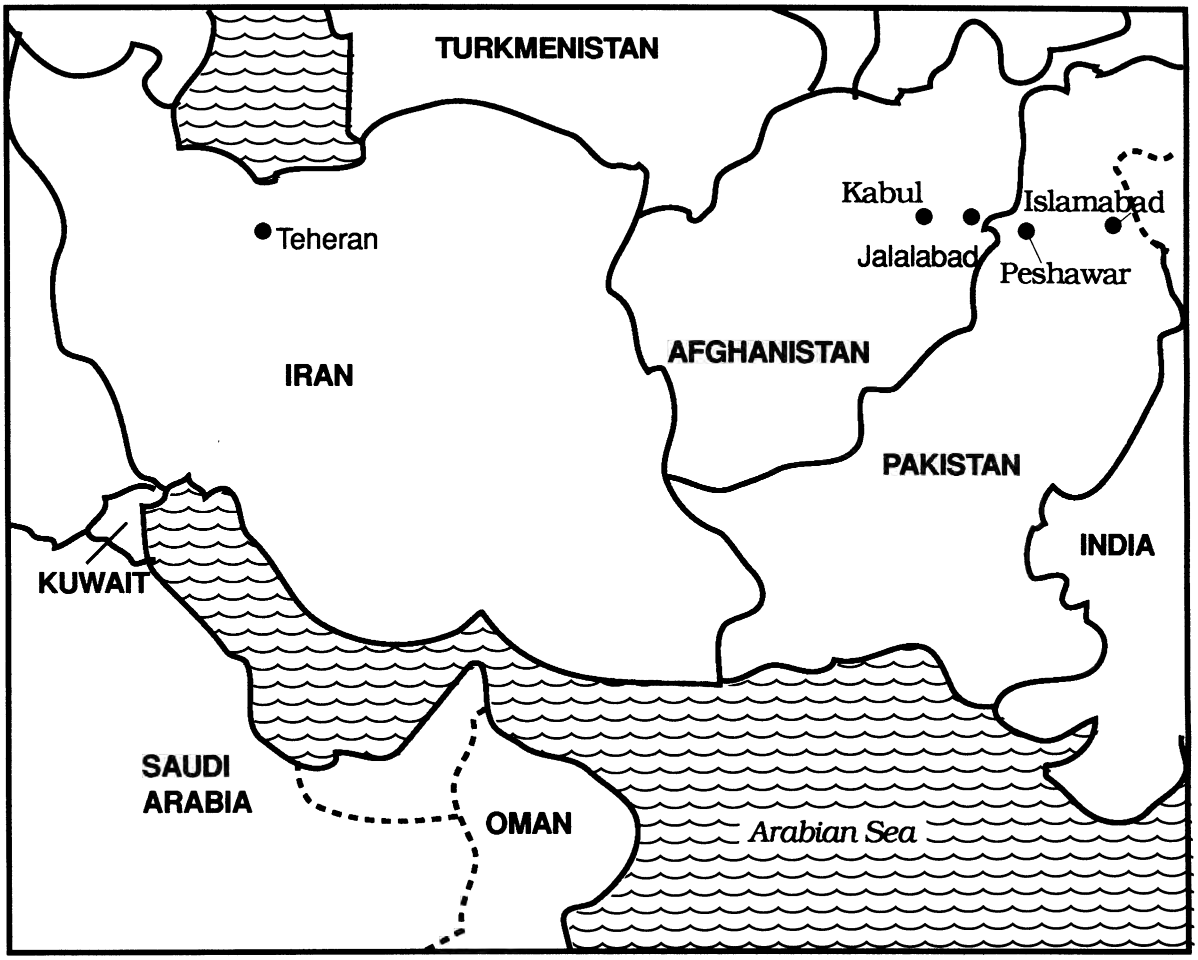
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of whom are still living in tents that offer little protection from harsh winter weather. According to the UN's Department of Humanitarian Affairs, "The winter will...exact a high toll in human lives, unless urgent relief measures are taken now."

While the need to help Afghans survive this winter is pressing, so is the need to help them begin to rebuild their country. According to a document outlining the UN's proposed program of assistance to Afghanistan in 1992, "Even before it was plunged into 13 years of war, Afghanistan was one of the world's least developed countries." The UN document adds, "If levels of illiteracy and basic education remain unchecked, the shortages of skilled manpower will become increasingly serious.... If irrigation systems are not repaired and extended, Afghanistan will be less and less able to feed its growing population. These trends must be curbed and reversed." Afghanistan does not have the resources to do that, however, without international help. And that is why donors' apparent forsaking of Afghanistan is so troubling.

Since the early 1980s, Afghans have been by far the largest refugee population in the world, numbering more than 3 million in Pakistan, and as many as 3 million others in Iran. Providing basic care and maintenance to the refugees in Pakistan alone (Afghan refugees in Iran receive minimal international assistance) cost the international community an average of about $64 million per year between 1984 and 1990--not counting the substantial sums that the United States, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and others spent on military assistance to the *mujahedin* (rebels who fought the Soviets and Soviet-backed Afghan government in Afghanistan).

When the Soviet Union withdrew its troops from Afghanistan in February 1989, many in the international community thought that Najibullah would quickly fall to the *mujahedin*, and that the bulk of Afghan refugees would return home shortly thereafter. But that did not happen. It took another three years (and the collapse of the Soviet Union) for the *mujahedin* to oust Najibullah and take Kabul. Although some 300,000 to 350,000 refugees re-

patriated during that three-year period (a number that would have been considered dramatic in any other refugee situation), it was only after Najibullah's fall that truly massive repatriation began.

According to UNHCR, during just the first nine months of 1992, as many as 1.2 million Afghan refugees may have repatriated from Pakistan. Another 200,000 reportedly returned home from Iran. With winter rapidly approaching, the rate has slowed considerably, but as of November, several thousand were still leaving Pakistan every week. But despite the unprecedented scale of the Afghan repatriation, the long-term benefit it offers both the refugees (repatriation is viewed as the ideal "durable solution" for refugees) and the international community (which has borne most of the cost of maintaining the refugees' camps), the Afghan repatriation has received little international attention and only limited donor support. The displacement that followed the battle for Kabul, including the flight of more than 61,000 new refugees to Pakistan, has also gone largely unnoticed.

Erik Christensen, director of the Danish Committee for Aid to Afghan Refugees (DACAAR) in Peshawar, the Pakistani city where most nongovernmental agencies (NGOs) working with Afghan refugees have been based, expressed a sentiment common to virtually all those involved with Afghan refugees. He said, "The major problem for Afghanistan and Afghans is that the donor community has, by and large, turned its back on Afghanistan." Richard Castrodeal, Chief of Office of the UN's Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian and Economic Assistance Programs relating to Afghanistan (UNOCA), said that "lack of attention is one of the major problems." He added, "During the [Afghan civil] war, there were lots of media people in Peshawar. Covering the war was sexy. But now they're gone."

That lack of international interest and the lukewarm donor response to the UN's appeals for aid to Afghans and Afghanistan have grave implications, nor only for Afghans' survival this winter, but for the returnees' long-term well-being, for the future of Afghanistan, and for other repatriation programs worldwide.

To assess the progress of the Afghan repatriation, to evaluate the potential effect on the returnees and other Afghans of donor nations' limited support, and to determine what must be done to ensure that Afghan repatriation does not become a humanitarian emergency, the U.S. Committee for Refugees (USCR) undertook site visits to Iran in July 1992, and to Pakistan and Afghanistan in September/October 1992. USCR met with officials of UN agencies involved in the repatriation/rehabilitation process, particularly UNHCR, representatives of the Iranian, Pakistani, and U.S. governments, directors and staff of nongovernmental organizations, and numerous Afghan refugees, returnees, and displaced people in Iran, Pakistan, and in Nangahar province, Afghanistan. This report, which focuses particularly on repatriation from Pakistan to Afghanistan, and its accompanying recommendations, are based, in part, on USCR's findings during those site visits.

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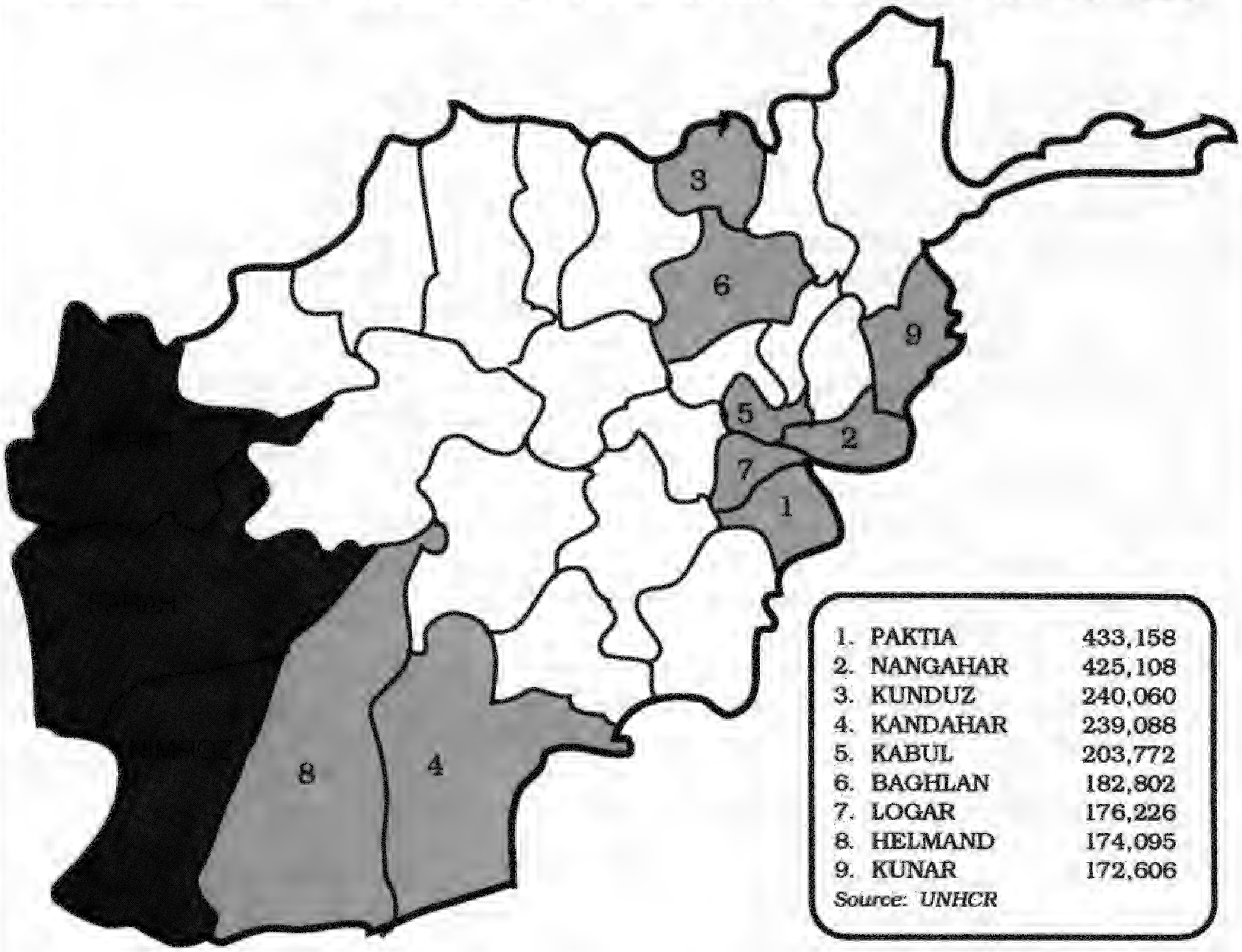
Background

Within months of the coup d'etat that brought a communist regime to power in Afghanistan in April of 1978, Afghan refugees began fleeing to Pakistan. They fled because they opposed the new regime's efforts to effect wide-reaching social and economic reforms, or because they were directly affected by the violence associated with the government's efforts to impose those reforms on a largely rural, conservative, and strongly Islamic population. Between April 1978 and late 1979, some 300,000 Afghan refugees entered Pakistan.

As 1979 ended, the (former) Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan and installed a puppet government. The Soviets used sophisticated military technology to try to establish control over the country. The flight of Afghan refugees accelerated rapidly, their number reaching 1.4 million in Pakistan by the end of 1980, and 2.3 million by the end of 1981. Similar numbers of Afghans fled to Iran.

In Pakistan, the Afghan refugees were well received. Numerous refugee camps were established in the border areas, though many refugees also settled in cities and towns, participating in, and often contributing to, the local economy. The Pakistan government's generosity, while essentially humanitarian, also served Pakistan's political interests. The strongly Islamic government of Pakistan vehemently opposed the Soviet presence in Afghanistan, and assisting Afghan refugees was a way of support-

AFGHANISTAN: PROVINCES FROM WHICH MOST REFUGEES FLED



1.	PAKTIA	433,158
2.	NANGAHAR	425,108
3.	KUNDUZ	240,060
4.	KANDAHAR	239,088
5.	KABUL	203,772
6.	BAGHLAN	182,802
7.	LOGAR	176,226
8.	HELMAND	174,095
9.	KUNAR	172,606

Source: UNHCR

Top nine provinces from which Afghan refugees fled to Pakistan.

Top three provinces from which Afghan refugees fled to Iran.

ing the also strongly Islamic *mujahedin*. According to a comprehensive study by Michael Knowles for the Refugee Policy Group in 1991, "All Afghan settlements...have offered sanctuary to *mujahedin* fighters.... They have also served as recruiting grounds for new fighters."

The Afghan refugees who fled to Iran, a disproportionate number of whom were single males, were mainly from the western provinces of Herat, Farah, and Nimroz. Most of them did not settle in camps, but in urban centers around the country. They largely integrated into the local economy, though often holding the least desirable, lowest-paying jobs, particularly in the construction industry. Iran did not seek international assistance until the mid-1980s. When it did, however, it received little help, though the refugee population there was the second largest in the world after Pakistan's. Ostensibly that was because relatively few refugees were in camps and most were viewed as being economically self-sufficient, but there is little doubt that political considerations were a significant factor.

Because of the Soviet participation, the Afghan civil war became a major Cold War battleground. The United States not only provided the *mujahedin* substantial military assistance, but also channeled much humanitarian aid through political parties representing the various *mujahedin* factions. The United States gave the *mujahedin* more than $2 billion in military and other aid between 1982 and Janu-

ary 1991. U.S. aid to refugees in Pakistan was also affected by Washington's desire to aid the rebels. According to Knowles, when controversy arose over the total number of refugees in Pakistan (the Pakistan government claimed their number was higher than some surveys suggested), the question was "squelched" by the United States and other donors. "Fully supporting the Afghan resistance [the *mujahedin*] was a U.S. priority," Knowles said, and Washington was willing to go along with "some diversion of humanitarian aid for military (or commercial) purposes," if that aided the *mujahedin*.

Throughout the 1980s, the Soviets maintained control over most Afghan cities and main roads, while continuing to attack rural areas, which were largely under *mujahedin* control, in order to wipe out the rebels' civilian support base. They razed whole towns and villages throughout Afghanistan. According to UNHCR consultant Wendy Batson, "Even those villages not directly affected by the conflict are often as devastated as those that were. The long years of war and abandonment have left houses collapsed, roads and irrigation systems deteriorated to the point of uselessness, and fields long overgrown. The scale of destruction is enormous."

The Soviet occupation of Afghanistan ended only after Moscow, under heavy domestic political pressure to end its unpopular involvement in Afghanistan, agreed to the terms of the 1988 Geneva Accords, an international agreement that called for the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan, the voluntary repatriation of Afghan refugees, and the establishment of Operation Salam, a program for the rehabilitation of Afghanistan, to be coordinated by UNOCA. The Soviet withdrawal took place between late 1988 and February 1989. Moscow's military aid to the Afghan government (as well as U.S. aid to the *mujahedin*) continued, however, until January 1992, after the Soviet Union's dissolution.

It was April 1992 before the *mujahedin* succeeded in overthrowing Najibullah. When they did, however, they turned against each other in a battle for control of Kabul, though ultimately the country as a whole. The inter-*mujahedin* rivalry is rooted in the complex history and inter-relations of Afghanistan's various ethnic groups. By and large, different *mujahedin* groups represent different ethnic groups, the home areas of which sometimes overlap present national boundaries. For example, Pushtuns, who have exercised most power in Afghanistan in recent times, are also the dominant group in the areas of Pakistan in which most Afghan refugees have been living (Pushtuns were also the largest ethnic group among the refugees); Tajiks, the second largest Afghan ethnic group, are the dominant group in Tajikistan, the former Soviet republic that borders Afghanistan on the north (and which is itself embroiled in a civil war, in which observers say Afghan rebel groups are at least indirectly involved). The *mujahedin* groups also reflect different political ideologies and religious perspectives (for example, some groups favor strict Islamic fundamentalism, while others are more secular).

Many observers of the Afghan political scene worry that the fighting between rival *mujahedin* groups, which is both encouraged by and a source of concern to Afghanistan's neighbors, might not only lead to continued instability in Afghanistan, but even to the disintegration of the country. Observers say that there are more than enough weapons in Afghanistan to carry on the war for another few years, and more continue to arrive from throughout the region, particularly from Iran and Saudi Arabia.

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Operation Salam

One of Operation Salam's major goals was to pave the way for large-scale repatriation by "creating conditions conducive to return," Knowles said. To do so, the UN sought funds not only for food aid for war-affected civilians already in Afghanistan, but also for mine clearance, health programs, rehabilitation of the water supply, basic education, road repair, services for groups with special needs, such as the disabled, and for voluntary repatriation (through UNHCR). However, Operation Salam ran into financial, logistical, political, and security problems from the start. According to Knowles, "The UN has not had the financial resources to carry out all of the projects which have been cited by needs assessments missions as prerequisites for return." That, he said, was because some donors continued to pour money into the war effort, yet at the same time were reluctant to provide funds for Operation Salam while the war was still going on (and before a large-scale return actually began).

Operation Salam also faced political/security problems. "Continuing widespread conflict hampered efforts to implement assistance projects," Knowles said, and leaders of different *mujahedin* groups fought for control of aid projects. "In the most extreme cases, aid...[became] an important source of revenue for some local commanders.... Often, rivals perceive[d] assistance as favoring an adversary. They retaliate[d] by trying to destroy or impede a project, or forcing their own cut from a program," he added.

UNHCR's "Encashment" Program

The fall of the Najibullah regime triggered an immediate surge in repatriations.

It soon became apparent that the Soviet withdrawal would not lead to a rapid *mujahedin* victory, or a mass repatriation. Nevertheless, a number of families and groups appeared interested in returning anyway. In July 1990, UNHCR initiated a pilot repatriation program, focusing on "encashment", in which refugee families cashed in their ration cards for an assistance package consisting of a 3,300 Pakistani rupee (about $130) cash grant, from which they were supposed to pay for their own transportation back to Afghanistan (and hopefully have some money left over for immediate necessities), and 300 kilograms of wheat to see them through their first months back home.

The encashment program was foreseen as temporary, but UNHCR has been pleased with the program (as have many others involved with the Afghan refugees), and it is now likely to remain in place until the repatriation is completed. UNHCR officials say that, given the uncertain conditions in Afghanistan, the program was not (and is not) intended to actively encourage refugees to repatriate, but to make it possible for them to do so if they wish. Equally important, said UNHCR's repatriation officer in Peshawar, Robert Breen, was that initiating the encashment program "had an important psychological effect in that repatriation at least became an issue to be discussed and considered."

Although the level of the encashment grant was somewhat arbitrarily set, UNHCR officials now believe that the level is appropriate, in that it enables refugees to get home and buy a few necessities, but is not so high as to encourage refugees to encash just for the money (a large majority of the refugees fled from the provinces immediately bordering Pakistan and are able to hire trucks to take them to their homes; refugees from provinces farther afield are provided transportation at reduced cost). Breen noted, however, that encashment "was always meant to be part of a larger program of assistance and rehabilitation inside Afghanistan. It was not felt that encashment would be the full extent of UN aid."

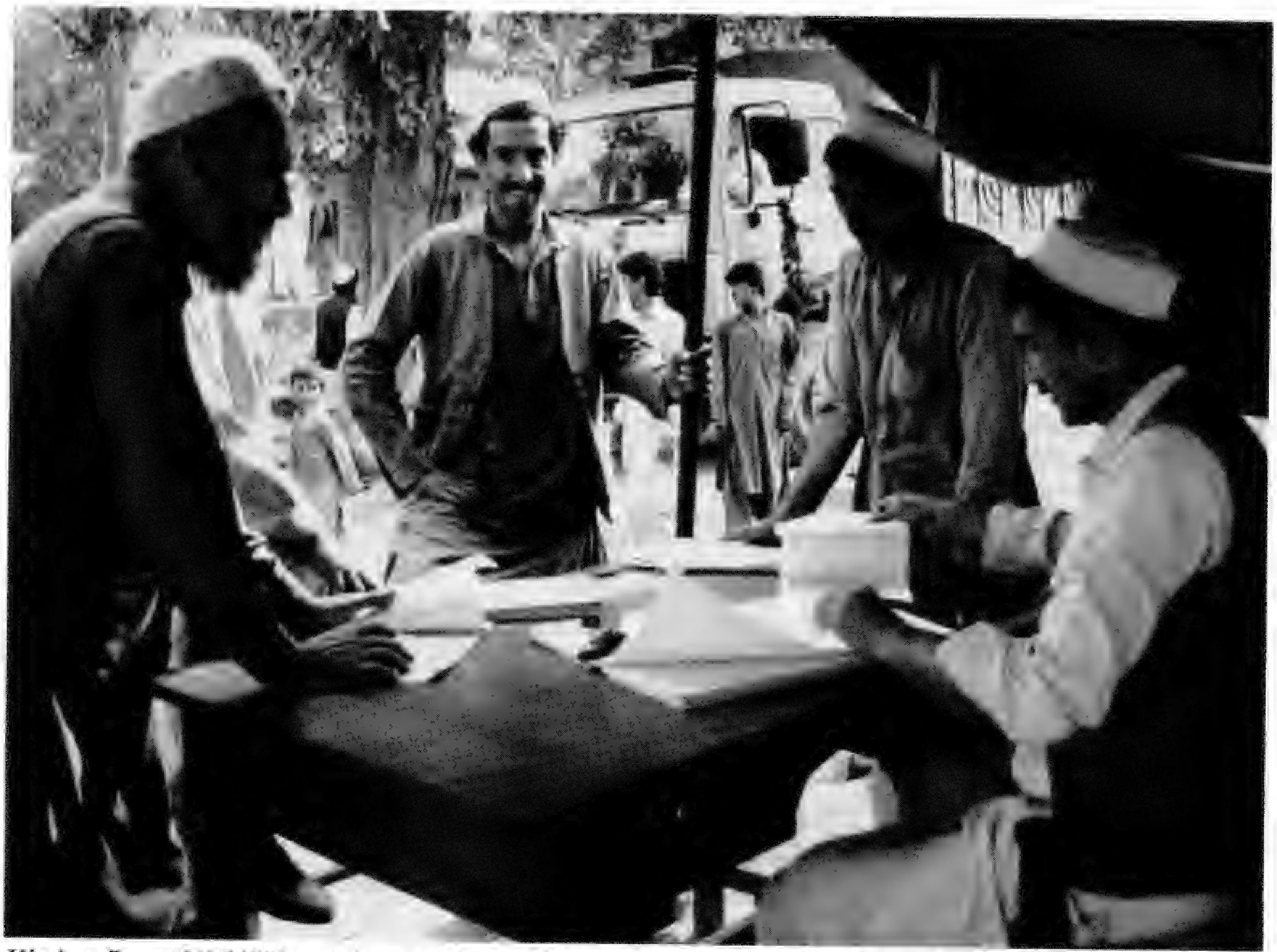
An estimated 300,000 to 350,000 Afghans repatriated or encashed during the period between 1989 and April 1992. It is not certain how many of those who encashed once the program began in July 1990 actually repatriated, since some percentage of those encashing were thought to be people with multiple ration cards, and movement across the border was not closely monitored. Most of those who did repatriate did so to relatively secure areas controlled by the *mujahedin*, despite the rebels' active opposition at that time to repatriation for political reasons (there were many reports of *mujahedin*--and also their supporters in the Pakistani security forces--physically preventing refugees from repatriating).

Others who were not yet ready to repatriate sent "advance teams" to Afghanistan, usually one or two members of the family who could begin to prepare the family's land, begin rebuilding irrigation canals, and rebuild the family home. According to Randy Martin, director of the International Rescue Committee's (IRC) program in Pakistan and Afghanistan, "When Najibullah fell, they were the ones who went back in large numbers. They were ready to go."

April 1992: Mass Repatriation Begins

According to UNHCR's Batson, on April 1, 1992, there were 2.8 million registered Afghan refugees still living in refugee camps/settlements in Pakistan. Another half million Afghans who were not registered as refugees (and therefore not receiving assistance) were living in cities and towns throughout Pakistan, primarily in Peshawar and Karachi. More than 83 percent of the refugees were from nine provinces in eastern and northern Afghanistan, five of which border Pakistan (see map of Afghan provinces).

The fall of the Najibullah regime triggered an immediate surge in repatriations. From January 1, 1992, to March 31, 1992, some 73,150 refugees in Pakistan encashed. Between



Khyber Pass: UNHCR monitors register Afghan refugees returning home through the main border crossing point between Pakistan and Afghanistan.
Photo: USCR/H.Ruiz

April and May, encashment in Pakistan increased 134 percent. In mid-May, some 1,000 to 1,400 were repatriating daily from Iran. In July, when the repatriation was at its peak, UNHCR reported that, during a one-week period, more than 100,000 Afghans repatriated from Pakistan. The agency called the Afghan repatriation the "largest and fastest repatriation program [ever] assisted by UNHCR."

Altogether, 1,182,851 Afghan refugees in Pakistan encashed between April 1, 1992 and November 30, 1992 (for the period January 1 through November 30, the total was 1,256,000. Based on increased monitoring of returnees at the main border crossing points between Pakistan and Afghanistan, UNHCR believes that most of those who have encashed since April have indeed repatriated to Afghanistan. [It is difficult to assess how many unregistered refugees have repatriated, though it is assumed that some number of them are doing so. It may be that unregistered refugees who are well integrated economically in Pakistan may be slow to repatriate. On the other hand, unregistered refugees who were facing great hardship in Pakistan may have been quick to repatriate.] Matiullah Khan, a Pakistani government official in the office concerned with refugees, says that Pakistan is more concerned with the repatriation of the registered refugees than with the unregistered. "The unregistered are somehow or other looking after themselves. They are not directly dependent on the government and therefore are not a liability to the government, although they do have an effect on the market."

Some Say Refugees Pressured To Leave

Although it is clear that the repatriation has been voluntary, in most cases even eager, some observers feel that there have also been both subtle and not so subtle pressures on the refugees to go. Some observers have, for example, expressed concern over the fact that the distribution of food rations was suspended in most refugee camps for several months in early 1992. One NGO representative said, "I think Pakistan did that to try to pressure the refugees to go

back." He added that security in the camps has also deteriorated, and that too is influencing refugees' decision to repatriate. Another relief worker said that many schools have been closed, and other social services also terminated in the camps, "which reinforces the message [to the refugees] that they should go."

Khan assured USCR that Pakistan "has never used food as a 'squeeze' to compel the refugees to go back." He said that the problem arose because relief food for the refugees usually is slow to arrive, and while in the past the Pakistan government had advanced food to the refugees on the promise that it would be repaid when the UN food arrived, it could no longer do so due to Pakistan's low food reserves. UNHCR's deputy chief of mission in Pakistan, Pierce Gerety, said that he doubts that the Pakistan government has a policy to withhold food in order to drive out the refugees. Khan added, however, that if all of the refugees do not repatriate, there could be problems. "If the donors continue to assist the refugees at the same level as before, and the refugees do not become a burden, then there is no problem. But if the donors don't, there will be a very real problem." If donors' lack of support for relief and rehabilitation programs in Afghanistan is indeed a reflection of diminished commitment to Afghans in general, Khan's concern may prove warranted.

The assistance currently available to returnees and others in need in Afghanistan...meets only a fraction of the need.

Another factor that may have affected the rate of return this year was a report that rebel leaders based in the north of Afghanistan threatened to appropriate land belonging to refugees if they did not repatriate. It is not clear just how strong a motivating factor this threat may have been, but the rate of return was very high to the two northern provinces that were among the nine top refugee-producing provinces.

When mass repatriation actually took off in April, the impact of poor donor support for Operation Salam was clear. Conditions in Afghanistan were no more conducive to large-scale repatriation than they were when Operation Salam began. Also, despite the lead time available, there was still no well-coordinated plan for how the UN, donors, and NGOs would respond to the mass repatriation. Only the encashment program was firmly in place--and reasonably funded (although at various points during the summer UNHCR only had enough cash on hand to keep the encashment program going for a few more days). According to DACAAR's Christensen, those involved with Afghan refugees, particularly the UN, "could have been prepared for this [mass repatriation] if we had started to plan for the repatriation and rehabilitation three years ago."

The idea that encashment would be just one component in the total assistance available to returnees, who would benefit from Operation Salam rehabilitation programs in Afghanistan, soon fell by the wayside. As UNHCR noted in a July report on the Afghan repatriation, the cash and food that refugees were receiving through the encashment program "is probably the most help most of the returning Afghans...[will] ever receive from the international community."

Some Operation Salam programs, particularly demining, are under way; both NGOs and individual donors (not only traditional Western donors but also other Muslim nations) are providing other direct/bilateral assistance; and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) has distinct UN development funds for Afghanistan.

UNHCR has also had some funds to assist particularly vulnerable returnees. According to UNHCR's Gerety, when UNHCR began the encashment program, the agency "made a policy decision that UNHCR would not seek to supplant the competent UN agencies in Afghanistan. We would fill gaps [in services to returnees], mobilize others, and we would act to help refugee communities when other UN agencies were not doing so. But our basic plan was that other relevant UN agencies would fulfill [returnees'] basic needs." Gerety added that in the June 1992 UN appeal, UNHCR, aware that other UN agencies were not being adequately funded to carry out rehabilitation programs in Afghanistan, sought $12 million for assistance to returnees.

But the assistance (both relief and rehabilitation) currently available to returnees and others in need in Afghanistan through all of the above channels meets only a fraction of the need. A quick look at the donor response to UN appeals for aid to Afghanistan this year shows why there is a problem. The UN has issued two appeals for Afghanistan for 1992, totalling $262.9 million, of which donors have pledged only $107.4 million, leaving a shortfall of $155.5 million. In the second of these appeals, in June, the Secre-

tary General sought $179.7 million for the last six months of 1992. As of December 8, this appeal had yielded only $75 million, leaving a shortfall of $104.7 million. Only the encashment and demining sectors have received significant pledges. Of the $21.6 sought for agriculture, only $370,000 has been pledged; of the $30 million sought for health, water, and sanitation, only $6.2 million has been pledged. Only $13.7 million of the $45.1 million sought in food aid has been pledged.

Reasons for Donors' Limited Response

There are many reasons for the limited international support for the UN programs in Afghanistan. Diminished international interest in Afghanistan since the end of the Cold War is the factor most often cited by UN and private agency officials in the region. But there are other reasons. Donors were disappointed when they pledged money to the first UN appeal for Operation Salam in 1989, but mass repatriation did not materialize. Subsequently, they were reluctant to commit money for repatriation and rehabilitation until they could see that it was plainly underway. Now that has happened, but many donors are still holding back. Relief officials attribute that to donors' concerns about the continuing fighting between rival *mujahedin* factions, which threatens to destroy newly rehabilitated infrastructure or to disrupt projects underway, and to the absence of a central government to coordinate the rehabilitation effort.

But some observers say that donors are also concerned about the capabilities of UNOCA itself, and about the poor coordination among UN agencies, and among UN agencies, NGOs, and donor governments' bilateral aid programs. Some in the relief community complain that UNOCA does not really serve any function, and that one of the few responsibilities it does have, to coordinate UN agencies' response to needs in Afghanistan, it carries out poorly. "I don't think UNOCA has had clear direction or vision," one UN official said. Private agency officials note that many donor governments prefer to channel money through their national NGOs rather than through UNOCA because of their concerns about the agency.

UNOCA's Castrodeal does not believe that donors are concerned about UNOCA. Instead, he says that donors' poor response is due to other factors, for example emergencies in other countries and recessions in donor countries' own economies, and because they haven't felt "a sense of urgency" about the situation in Afghanistan.

Although some attempts to coordinate relief efforts are taking place in any given region of Afghanistan, these are not always successful. UNHCR's Gerety admitted that coordination in Nangahar province was "less than it should be." Gerety said that he thinks the UN agencies do collaborate, but that it is difficult to coordinate activities in Afghanistan from Pakistan, and that there not being a central government to work with in Afghanistan complicates the situation even further.

Optimism Prevails

Although the assistance available to returnees (as well as to the internally displaced and others at risk or in need) in Afghanistan is far short of what the UN had originally considered the "prerequisite" for mass repatriation, many of those involved with Afghan refugees are positive about the repatriation, and optimistic about the returnees' prospects.

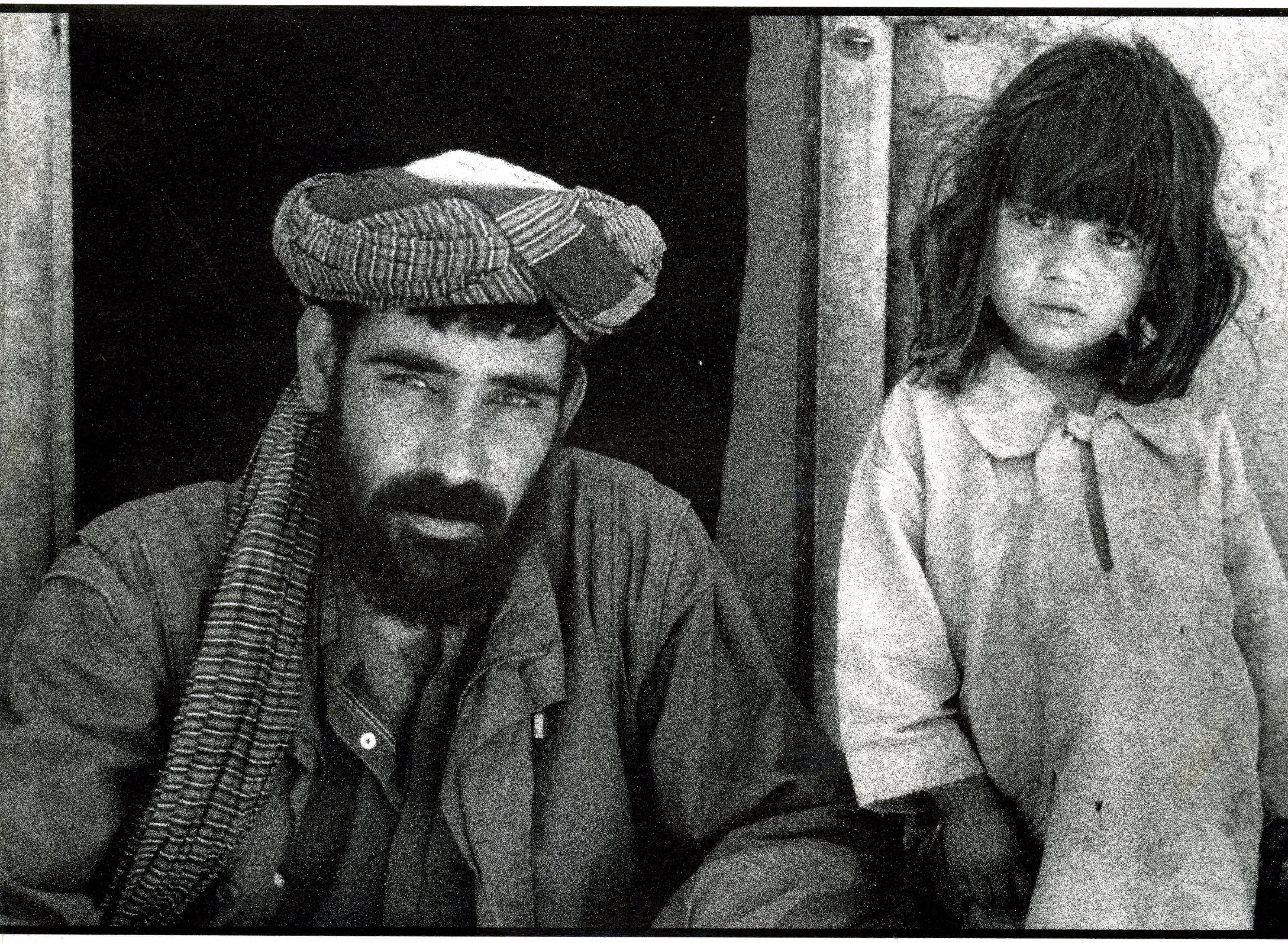
Until recently, Jon Bennett was the executive director of the Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief (ACBAR), a Peshawar-based group that coordinates NGO activities for Afghan refugees and returnees, and provides a forum for communication and coordination between NGOs and the UN regarding relief activities. He said, "The refugees would not have gone back if they didn't think they could survive.... A million people can't be wrong." Another NGO official added, "Afghans are good at surviving.... [They] are able, as individuals and families, to plan. Most of those who are returning probably have a plan as to how they will survive." But optimism is generally tempered with concern. Christensen cautioned that in making their plans, "Some of them [returning Afghans] may make some miscalculations." Nancy Hatch Dupree, who heads ACBAR's documentation center, concurs. "These refugees aren't dumb," she said. "They won't return without assessing the situation. But some may be over optimistic; and some may return expecting to get the same [international] help there that they got in Pakistan."

"These refugees aren't dumb. They won't return without assessing the situation. But some may be over optimistic."

ISSUE PAPER

LEFT OUT IN THE COLD

THE PERILOUS HOMECOMING OF AFGHAN REFUGEES



U.S. COMMITTEE FOR REFUGEES

DECEMBER 1992

